

Do Proper Names Have an Etymological Meaning?

Willy Van Langendonck

DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.22

Abstract

The question has arisen whether proper names [= names] have an ‘etymological meaning’ (*etymologische Bedeutung*). Sonderegger (2004, 3406-3407) formulated the law that historically, all names go back to an appellative (a common noun), the so-called *Gesetz der appellativischen Herkunft*. Brendler (2008) criticized this law, and speaks of etymological history. We should certainly keep to a wider conception. Here, I want to specify what this means for various kinds of names. I will focus on the semantic aspect, and deal with the formal structure where necessary. Several factors should be taken into account:

1. Different onymic subclasses may entail different paths in etymological history.
2. We should distinguish between names that originated through bestowal, and those that came into being by a gradual evolution.
3. I maintain the distinction between genuine ‘proper names’, and ‘proprietary lemmas’, i.e. onymic dictionary entries.
4. Especially in connection with family names, the chronological succession of the name lemma is important.
5. Another distinction is that between the purely lexical meaning of the word (e.g., *Fox* refers to an animal), and the actual motivation, i.e. the link between name and name-bearer.

0. Introduction

The question whether proper names [= names, or nomemes] have an etymological meaning was dealt with by Silvio Brendler (2008) for Austrian place names. He interprets this meaning in a wider sense, as a historical dimension, a biography (p. 18). I start from this plausible idea to further investigate the problem, which I assume is similar for most European languages. Usually, much attention is given to the formation of the toponym, as useful as this may be. The meanings are often discussed in a not very consistent way. In this connection, Stefan Sonderegger (2004, 3406-3407) formulated the thesis that historically all names go back to an appellative (a common noun). He called it the law of appellative origin (*das Gesetz der appellativischen Herkunft*). I agree with Brendler’s rejection of that law. As he argues, there are countless counterexamples. To illustrate my own theses, I will take examples from English, Dutch and French onomastics, focusing on the semantic aspect, and deal with the formal structure where necessary. Before the examination of the history of some major name types, a few factors have to be taken into account.

1. Factors to be taken into account

1. Different onymic subclasses may entail different paths in etymological history: first names, family names, bynames, place names, temporal names, names of books or films, etc. I will limit myself to settlement names, and to the main subclasses of personal names. As the main category of names, personal names provide us with an unexpected plethora of different underlying elements.
2. An important dichotomy is the one between names that came into being by a gradual evolution (e.g., most European place names: *Cambridge* [UK]), and names that originated through bestowal (e.g., Christian names: *John, Ann*) (see Coates, 2005). Traditionally, onomasts have mainly been interested in evolution names, usually dealing with their oldest stage, thereby often ignoring intermediate stages. In the course of its history, the

same place name normally displays chronological variants, allonomes. For instance, the old form *Dresdene* is an allonome of the modern name *Dresden*.

3. I would like to point out once more the distinction between genuine ‘proper names’ referring to one entity, and on the other hand name lemmas, whose nature may be propriial (i.e. onymic), appellative, constructional, or even sentential. Propriial lemmas, i.e. onymic dictionary entries, we find especially in lists of European first names (cf. Van Langendonck, 2007). For example, when I say *Mary is a common first name*, we have to do with a mere propriial lemma, which does not refer to any specific person. The reference to persons is potential. This lemma *Mary* underlies a genuine first name, a proper name, if we say: *Mary is the mother of Jesus*. By contrast, an appellative lemma underlies a film name like *Gladiator*. A constructional lemma underlies the novel name *The Old Man and the Sea*. A sentential lemma underlies the film name *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.
4. As will become clear, in connection with family-names, the chronological succession of the name lemma is important.
5. One last distinction is that between the purely lexical meaning of the word underlying the name and the motivation given at the time of naming. For instance, the surname *Fox* originally goes back to the appellative lexeme *fox* indicating an animal, but the actual motivation for the naming, i.e. the link between name and name-bearer, must have come into being by another process, in this case with the help of metaphor or metonymy. For example, the first Mister Fox may have resembled a fox physically or psychologically (metaphor), or have hunted foxes (metonymy). Thus, the feature ‘animal’ does not exhaust the original sense of the name.

2. The etymological history of the main name classes: place and personal names

In most name classes, such as place and personal names, we find cases of evolution and cases of bestowal. As a rule, evolution names are primary, bestowal names secondary.

2.1. Place names: settlement names

Let’s take the city name *Cambridge*. If it is about *Cambridge* UK, the original lexical meaning can be paraphrased as ‘bridge on the river Cam’. The formal structure is the compound [cam+bridge] < *Grontabricc* ‘bridge on the River Cam < Cante < Granta’, hence composed of the river name *Gronta* and the appellative *bricc*. But, rather than to a bridge, *Cambridge* refers to a city, or at first, to a settlement. This supposes a metonymic process: Cambridge is the town at the bridge on the river Cam. We could call this the motivation of this name-giving. Hence, the history of the name consists at least of a compound [cam+bridge] with the lexical meaning ‘bridge on the Cam’, plus the motivation of indicating a settlement in this environment. This is much more than an appellative origin. But what about Cambridge, MA, in America? Obviously, this is a migration name related to the original Cambridge UK. But how are they related onomastically? Apparently, there is no appellative structure or meaning in the case of the American Cambridge, just a lexical item. We could say that there is a place name lemma *Cambridge*, whereby the second name-giving in the States was motivated by the wish to remind people of the first and famous Cambridge UK. Note that the latter came into being by gradual evolution, but Cambridge, MA, by bestowal.

To conclude on place names, not only noun phrases like *Cambridge* are found as underlying lemmas. I just mention the city name *Antwerp*, which evolved out of the Germanic prepositional phrase *anda werpum* ‘opposite the accretions’, or more completely ‘the place opposite the accretions’.

2.2. Personal names: first names, family names, bynames, chat names

a) First names

The naming process in the case of first names resembles the process in which the name *Cambridge, MA*, originated. At least in the European tradition, we have a stock of proprial lemmas at our disposal to bestow a forename on children, which can be done by state and/or church. The first name lemmas of the European collection often go back very far in history. For instance, the Romans borrowed their 18 masculine first names from the Etruscans. Thus, we see that the origin of Latin lemmas like *Marcus*, *Caius*, or *Titus* lies in another language which we cannot even trace. To conclude: a particular first name mostly derives from a proprial lemma, the origin of which is often remote and unclear.

b) Family names may originate in different ways, as we know. The point to make here is that we should bear in mind the chronology of the name. A lemma like the Dutch *Timmermans* is now a family name, referring to a group of relatives. This lemma was derived from a genitive formation ending in *-s*, which initially refers to the son or daughter of '(de) Timmerman', an individual byname. In turn, this goes back to the appellative *timmerman* 'carpenter', the earliest stage, an appellative with multiple referents. Thus, at each stage we have different referents, hence different names. So we have: *timmerman* 'carpenter' (app.) > *(de) Timmerman* (individual byname) > *Timmerman-s* (patronymic and afterwards inheritable surname). This picture we find in the evolution of most European family names. Of course, family names need not ultimately derive from appellatives as in the carpenter instance. First names may lie at the basis. But if somebody is called *Peters*, it is not sufficient to say that it comes from the first name *Peter*. Again, in each of the intermediate stages, we have different referents. In the beginning there was a *Peter*, then his son or daughter, referred to by the genitivized patronymic *Peter-s*. In subsequent generations, a family name developed which refers to a group of relatives throughout history. Another onymic origin is toponymic. The surname of George Washington ultimately comes from the homophonous toponym. Other names go back to appellatives denoting dwelling-places, e.g., Eng. *Field*, Dutch *Vandevelde* 'from the field', French *Dupont* 'from the bridge'. The last two were formed by a prepositional phrase, which is common practice in French and Dutch.

A rather unusual case of family name development is constituted by such French surnames as *Martin* and *Saint-Martin*. As the late Martina Pitz (2007) puts it, the high frequency of surnames like *Martin* is out of all proportion to the frequency of the related forenames in the late Middle Ages. By contrast, it squares well with the high frequency of the related patron saints. This fits in with the numerous surnames of the type *Saint-Martin*, *Saint-Michel*, *Saint-Paul*, *Saint-Remi*, *Saint-Etienne*, which are mostly not bestowed after a place, but after the patron saint of the baptismal church. The name was then passed on as a patronymic, becoming a family name later on.

Thus, we see that the original lexical status and the motivation for surnames may differ greatly.

For 19th century foundlings, all kinds of arbitrary lemmas were used as surnames, not only existing lemmas taken from common family or place name types, but also indications of the place where they were found, e.g., Flemish Dutch *Aendenboom* '(found) at the tree'. In this respect, the bestowal of the lemma *Temmerman* 'carpenter' on such a baby may be strange if we don't know the motivation, which can be paraphrased as 'found at the gate of citizen *Temmerman*'s house'. Some of these foundling names refer to the time they were found, e.g., *Januari* 'found in January'. Really devastating for the law of the appellative origin of names is the fact that foundlings sometimes received surnames derived from pure nonsense words. Although this was forbidden by Napoleonic law, in our Flemish material we

encountered numerous examples: *Jeurk, Joek, Frod, Fulze, Mierde, Murt, Ipper, Jalte, Jerle, Sollx*, etc. In such instances, there is no underlying form that even reminds us of an existing lexeme with a meaning. Here, there is nothing but the motivation to bestow a surname on a foundling the name-giver clearly was not interested in at all.

c) Bynames

Concerning modern bynames, I mention the naming practices of young people. Bynames for teachers or for other pupils derive not only from appellatives or even appellative-like structures, but from all possible linguistic sources, including first and family names, or even a combination of figures, as in 2-2. Constituents also occur, e.g. *Fat Boy Smell*, and even sentences: *De-maan-schijnt-door-de-bomen* ‘The moon shines through the trees’, for a bald teacher. Sometimes a double motivation is found: *Kabouter* ‘goblin, dwarf’ was short and had the resembling family name *Cabooter*. As in the case of certain foundling names, we find no lexeme and hence no lexical meaning in bynames such as *Mm Mm*. But at least there is a sensible motivation here, viz. the fact that the girl who received this nickname always said *mmmm*, so this name can be categorized as a delocutive.

d) Chat names

Up to now, we have come across proper names with an underlying lemma consisting of at least a phonetic-linguistic form. However, even this certainty breaks down when we look at chat names or nicks that chatters give to themselves in CMC (computer-mediated communication) on the internet. The motivation for the nick is sometimes based on a personal appraisal of its sound, image, length, attractiveness or aesthetic value. Since CMC is a visual media, some male chatters invent a nick they want to look interesting, using not just letters but also special signs and symbols, little faces among other things. Look at the following nicks of a few men:

^{- _ -}^
 } {e||} {unter
phRe4k

Sound and image can be combined:

DaStUrBeD, D@rkst@r[Tr]

These structures are not purely linguistic names, or not linguistic at all in the case of the face example. On the other hand, they play the role of names, being intended as a kind of pseudonym. Anyway, here we are very far from the law of the appellative origin of names.

Thus, we see that personal names on their own provide us with a plethora of different origins. In other subclasses of names, some of these structures also occur, as in the above names of books or films. In trade and brand names, we encounter all kinds of structures as well. Names of letters or numbers can function as proper names, depending on the construction they occur in, e.g.:

Three is a sacred number [in subject position] / *the number three* [in apposition]

B is a frequent letter [in subject position] / *the letter B* [in apposition]

Names of years have numbers as underlying lemmas, as in *the year 2000* [in apposition]. Of course, I cannot go into all these categories, since it's time for a conclusion.

3. Conclusion

I conclude that the history of a proper name consists of a motivation attached mostly, but not always, to an appellative or to an onymic word, a group of words, or even a sentence, with a lexical meaning. Sometimes, however, the motivation is attached to a meaningless form, a nonsense word, letters and numbers, or even letters combined with non-linguistic signs. An appellative lemma is only one of a number of possible origins, and probably not the most frequent one.

References

- Brendler, Andrea; Brendler, Silvio. 2007. Hrsgg. *Europäische Personennamensysteme. Ein Handbuch von Abasisch bis Zentralladinisch. Anlässlich der 65. Geburtstage von Rosa Kohlheim und Volker Kohlheim*. Hamburg: Baar.
- Brendler, Silvio. 2008. "Gibt es die sogenannte "etymologische Bedeutung" bei Namen?" *Österreichische Namenforschung* 36/3, 13-19.
- Coates, Richard. 2005. "A Speculative Psycholinguistic Model of Onymization". In: Brozović– Rončević, Dunja & Caffarelli, Enzo (eds.). *Naming the World. From Common Nouns to Proper Names* (Proceedings International Symposium, Zadar 2004; RION International Series 1). Roma: Soc. Ed. Romana, 3–12.
- Pitz, Marina. 2007. "Das französische Personennamensystema". In: Brendler & Brendler, 215-226.
- Sonderegger, Stefan. 2004. "Namengeschichte als Bestandteil der deutschen Sprachgeschichte". In: Besch, W. et al. (eds.). *Sprachgeschichte: Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und ihrer Erforschung*. 2nd ed. Vol. 4 Berlin, 3405-3436.
- Van Langendonck, Willy. 2007. *Theory and Typology of Proper Names*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Willy Van Langendonck
Katolieke Universiteit Leuven
Belgium
willy.VanLangendonck@arts.kuleuven.be